

The Iron Sergeant

By SFC (Ret) Richard Raymond, III

In his long and distinguished military career, GEN George Washington saw many a hero and witnessed many a deed of valor on the field of battle. When he established as the first American award for "instances of unusual gallantry, extraordinary fidelity and essential service," the Badge of Military Merit (the original Purple Heart), he undoubtedly had men like SGT David L. Brainard in mind.

More than two centuries ago Washington pinned the Badge of Military Merit on the coats of three sergeants who had walked through the flame of battle to earn them. Yet none before or since had faced and beaten more terrible foes—cold, hunger, desolation and despair—than SGT Brainard, 5th Cav (detached), U.S. Army.

Brainard was among the five ragged, emaciated survivors of the Greely Arctic Expedition who were snatched from the brink of death. And all owed their survival to SGT Brainard—who received a gold watch for his efforts.

In May 1881, Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely, a Signal Corps officer and Civil War veteran, led a party of 25 soldier-scientists in setting up a station at Lady Franklin Bay, 300 miles from the North Pole.

Like Greely, Brainard impressed all members as a man who knew his duty and would perform it, come what might. For he had faced bullets and taken wounds and in a frontier Army where stripes came slowly, he was a sergeant after only five years' service.

Appointed first sergeant and chief commissary, his duties embraced not only the normal administrative management of 21 enlisted members, but also the overseeing of exact and equitable issuance of rations and supplies. And, as required of all other expedition members, he kept a detailed journal of activities.

At the end of the first year, a scheduled resupply ship failed to push through a channel being blocked with thick ice. A second vessel the following summer was caught and crushed, its crew barely managing to save themselves. Though there was plenty of food and fuel, Greely followed his orders and withdrew from his base to Cape Sabine, 250 miles to the south.

After 500 crooked miles through the grinding ice floes, they set up a rough camp and prepared for the coming winter. Rations were cut to bare-survival level and all hands made to hunt, fish and trap for whatever thin subsistence

might be found in that barren waste. Not least of their anxieties was fuel—of what use were rations if they froze?

Now Brainard's character came to the fore. With all food and fuel in his absolute care, with every human incentive to cheat, he held unswervingly to his trust. Each man should have his just measure—no more, no less. Of his own efforts, he gathered some 400 pounds each month of the unpalatable and faintly nourishing shrimp called "sea lice."

When one member fell ill in a fearful 200-mile trip to find supplies, Brainard went out alone to feed and bring him back alive. Yet in this desperate plight, there was one who cheated, who stole food from the others. Such a fellow, they reckoned, was little better than a murderer. Greely wrote a grim order, which Brainard carried out: "Shoot the thief." In his official report, Greely later wrote, "I am quite sure that, in this dire extremity, not a morsel of unauthorized food was consumed by Sergeant Brainard."

On a day in June 1884, Brainard served out the last of the rations. All that could be done had been and all but Brainard and PVT Long were confined by weakness to their sleeping bags to await the end. Eighteen members had already died from starvation, drowning or freezing. Yet they had preserved their scientific records, the fruit of three bitter years under the arctic winds.

And then a long, mournful wail drifted over the frozen flats. It was a steam whistle—the rescue ships had arrived! Greely and his six skeletal men were taken aboard the Navy's *Thetis* and tenderly cared for. One died on the way home.

After a searing public investigation, in which Greely's every act and motive were closely examined, he was absolved of the slightest suspicion of wrong. The clearest proof of high character was his later promotion to major general and chief of the Signal Corps. Brainard himself received a commission in the Cavalry, "for gallant and meritorious service in the Arctic Expedition of 1881-84." He served for more than 40 years with increasing distinction and honor.

In 1930, Greely at the age of 91 received a Medal of Honor for "a lifetime of public service." And at his side in this proud moment stood his one-time first sergeant, now a retired brigadier general. He too wore his honors, graven in letters of gold, upon his faithful heart. ■



The six survivors of the Greely Arctic Expedition sat for this portrait in 1884. From left are Privates Julius Fredericks, Henry Biederbick and Maurice Connell, Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely, Sergeant Francis Long and Sergeant David Brainard. (U.S. Army photo)

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